



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

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Fact Sheet

Operation ICE Storm

“These ruthless smugglers view human life as nothing more than cargo for profit; to them, the value of a dollar is much more important than the value of human life. We’re making a commitment to put an end to this violence.”—DHS Assistant Secretary Michael J. Garcia

In recent years, human smuggling gangs have descended on the Southwest border, building up a lucrative industry by charging people substantial fees to be brought into the United States illegally.

The logistics of the industry are troubling enough, as men, women and children are smuggled across the border like contraband – packed into suffocating, airless trucks or marched across blistering hot deserts. An equally disturbing trend that accompanies this human tragedy is the increasing violence of rival gangs fighting it out for control of smuggling routes, turf, and clients. In some cases, these gangs have gone so far as to seize hostages and even kill the migrants they are paid to smuggle in order to deny profit to their competitors.

To fight violent human smuggling and trafficking gangs in Phoenix, Arizona, and the surrounding area, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) launched **Operation ICE Storm** – an unprecedented multi-agency initiative to dismantle the organized criminal outfits that have made human smuggling a profitable but bloody business venture in the Southwest United States.

ICE, the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), seeks to prevent terrorist and criminal activity by targeting the people, money, and materials that support terrorist and criminal organizations. As part of that mission, ICE focuses on combating the organized smuggling and trafficking networks that covertly move aliens, drugs, weapons, and contraband into the United States.

These networks pose a significant potential homeland security vulnerability as well, since the same routes and methods used to smuggle an illegal worker could be used to smuggle a terrorist or radiological bomb. ICE Storm is part of ICE’s broader goal of fighting human smuggling and trafficking wherever it may occur -- to ensure U.S. border security, restore integrity to the nation’s immigration system, and shut down vulnerabilities in the nation’s homeland security.

In Operation ICE Storm, our methodology brings to bear the broad statutory authorities and investigative expertise of ICE in a task force configuration to include internal and external components. This task force approach combines the wide range of skills, enforcement tools, and legal authorities of several agencies – pooling resources to develop a more powerful weapon in the fight against smuggling.

One of ICE's most important contributions to this initiative is targeting smuggling organizations' money in order to disable their operations by crippling their financial infrastructure. ICE lends its experience in financial investigations to help state and local agencies follow the money the trail in ways not possible before. In addition, ICE's authority for enforcing immigration law provides another powerful tool in the fight against human smuggling. These combined authorities allow us to attack smuggling rings from multiple angles.

Since its beginning in October 2003, Operation ICE Storm has led to the arrest of 241 defendants on a wide range of violations, including human smuggling, money laundering, kidnapping, hostage-taking, narcotics smuggling and possession, and illegal weapons possession. More than \$5.3 million in criminal currency has been seized from smuggling organizations, along with more than 125 weapons, including handguns, AK-47s, and SKS military assault rifles.

In addition, ICE Storm has been credited with a significant drop in violent crime in the Phoenix area, with notable declines in the city's murder rate, sexual assaults, aggravated assaults, robberies, weapons seizures, and smuggling-related violence.

Other agencies participating in ICE Storm include the U.S. Attorney's Office; U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP); the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives; the Maricopa County Attorney's Office; the Arizona Department of Public Safety; the city police departments of Phoenix, Mesa, Tempe, and Scottsdale; and the Maricopa and Pinal County Sheriff's Offices.

While Operation ICE Storm focuses on the Phoenix metropolitan area, the initiative is designed as a strategic model for similar anti-smuggling and anti-gang operations in other parts of the nation. ICE has already launched new initiatives based the ICE Storm model of coordination and cooperation between federal, state, and local agencies:

- In March 2004, DHS launched the Arizona Border Control (ABC) initiative, led by ICE and CBP, to stop the flow of illegal immigration at the Arizona-Mexico border through aggressive policing, interagency cooperation, and increased surveillance by unmanned aerial drones.
- In June 2004, DHS launched the LAX Initiative, an operation to deter human smuggling at the Los Angeles International Airport, a key transportation hub used by criminal organizations to move smuggled migrants to destinations across the United States.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), responsible for the enforcement of border, economic, infrastructure, and transportation security laws. ICE seeks to prevent acts of terrorism by targeting the people, money, and materials that support terror and criminal networks.